

## **FAMILY TRIBUTE TO OUR COUSIN, OUR HERO**



**As cousins growing up in Redlands, we shared a carefree childhood of hide-and-seek in the orange groves, joy rides in his Model A Ford rumble seat and mountains of whipped cream on legendary pumpkin pie served by his mother every Thanksgiving until he died.**

**Donald Lee Bruckart, one of 11 Redlands men killed in action in South Vietnam, was “Donnie” to us, a big brother who joined the Navy, the only one among us to serve in the Armed Forces, the one missing from our reunions where we now share our grief and our memories.**



**Donald served on an Armored Troop Carrier, or Tango boat, in River Assault Squadron 11 - River Assault Division 111. His boat number was T-111-2. Sailors on**

**Donnie's river boat described him *"as a very easy person to work with and always helpful,"* said Adam Metts, the Engineman who survived the March 31, 1969 midnight attack on the Mekong Marauders patrol force.**



***"I was on the boat the night he died. We were on our way back from patrol up the river when Charlie ambushed us,"* Metts said. *"Don died instantly. He never knew what hit him."***

**Three other sailors were seriously wounded in the ambush. *"It was our third time on river patrol and we would fire into the jungle to keep Charlie from free access,"* Metts said. *"We were on our way back when we were hit by two rockets."***



**The sailors of the Mobile Riverine Force - Task Force 117 defended the Mekong Delta in several Provinces, which included Kien Tuong Province where Donald was KIA. The IV Corps combat zone was the southernmost military region in South Vietnam.**

**According to the Mobile Riverine Force Association (MRFA), 22 sailors from Donald's River Assault Division 111 were killed on river patrol from 1967 to 1969. When combining the four squadrons there were 118 men who died while serving with the Mobile Riverine Force during the war. In all there were 2,558 Navy deaths among the 58,000+ U.S casualties.**

**The Tango was a 17-foot wide by 56-foot long boat that weighed approximately 60 tons with a top speed of 8-12 m.p.h., depending on the tide and rate of flow. *"Life on the boat was usually slow and dull. Our operations were from a day to over a week long. Sometimes we just carried cargo from point A to B,"* Metts said.**

***"Don's job was gunner's mate and his primary weapon was a .50-caliber machine gun."***

**The Tango's 7-man crew *"was not a really tight group, probably due to the fact we were from all over the country and the fact that the next fire fight might send you home stopped the building of friendships,"* Metts said. *"For the most part, nobody talked about home. It was too hard to think about."***

Still, the sailors appreciated *“Don’s quiet nature – he wasn’t outspoken and didn’t talk much about his family,”* Metts said. *“We called him ‘Whitey’ because he had the lightest hair and skin that didn’t tan too well.”*

Metts, a Granby, Texas resident, has a Texas license plate TANGO 111-2 with a Purple Heart *“to honor Don and the mission in which he died.”* Metts attends the MRFA Bi-Annual reunions dedicated to preserving the memories and sacrifices of the assault missions. *“Win the Delta come Hell or low water”* was their motto.

Donnie received the Purple Heart Medal as well as several other medals and ribbons, but his family has been unable to locate them. Personnel from the MRFA are assisting with this matter. The flag that was draped on his casket is the only item in the family’s possession.



Memories of Donnie are still vivid among his cousins who contacted Adam Metts for his contribution to this tribute.

*“Donnie was always a big brother to me,”* said cousin Bob “Robbie” Bruckart of San Diego. *“Aunt Elizabeth (Donnie’s mom) would always come get me and I’d spend the day with them running through the groves, building forts, riding bikes and everything else young boys did in those days.”*

*“I learned a lot about building things, grading and the way water flows in ditches that I believe led me to becoming a civil engineer....as we got older, there was always work in the groves spraying weeds, digging ditches, hoeing weeds. Donnie taught me to work hard and save your money, except for a few beers.”*

Donnie went to San Bernardino Valley College and then San Jose State, majoring in engineering until he got a draft notice and joined the Naval Reserves. He was moved to active duty status in 1968.

*“I saw him a few days before he shipped out to Nam,”* said cousin Bob. *“He was quite confident that he would be returning safe... He was always one to work hard and not look for the easy way out. I believe he volunteered for the river boats.”*

Donnie wrote to Bob a few times, *“but he never mentioned the danger of his assignments.”*

*“For many years after his death, I would dream he was still around,”* Bob said. *“I missed him a ton. I often thought about how we would open a partnership in engineering someday.”*

Cousin Bill *“Billy”* Bruckart of San Jose was only about 12 years old when Donnie, then 21, shipped out but they had a special bond. *“Donnie loved to ride horses....he would come to the house once or twice a week and we would saddle up and ride the hills east of Panorama Drive prior to sunset.”*

*“Little did I imagine the thoughts that must have been going through his mind... contemplating the war and his responsibilities as a young man on the edge of being drafted,”* Bill said.

Donnie was serious about keeping in touch with his cousins, so much so that he drove 500 miles to visit Susie Bruckart Gran in Reno where she was attending college. That visit was their last. *“I treasure that memory. His death was such a shock to our family. We just weren’t prepared, but maybe he was, although we didn’t talk about what could happen.”*

Although she was away at college, Susie said her family had assured her Donnie’s enlistment in the Navy was the safest course at the time the ground war was raging. *“So we sent Donnie off with guarded confidence that he’d be back.”*

He was buried with full military honors at Hillside Memorial Park in Redlands.

Second-cousin Sarah *“Sally”* Gregory of Missoula, Montana, said the impact of his death is difficult to describe. *“I have a rubbing of Donnie’s name from the Vietnam Wall and it always gives me spine tingles when I hold it. In our own ways, we still hold Donnie’s memory in heart, in our bodies.”*

Donnie spent a summer at Sugar Pine Lodge, the Gregory cabin at Twin Peaks, California, working with cousins Tom Gregory, Bill, Bob and their uncles thinning trees. *“I do remember Donnie’s laugh and the fact that he was always kind to me,”* Sarah said. *“My mother, Simmie, always said Donnie took after his sweet and gentle mother, Aunt Elizabeth. I agree.”*

Cousin Vicki Bruckart Hoekstra of San Juan Capistrano was impressed that Donnie didn’t ignore his younger cousins. *“We were just the little kids but he would pick us up and give us rides in his Model A rumble seat. That was so cool.”*

Vickie said the grief and sadness over Donnie’s death consumed his parents. *“It took a large chunk of their hearts. Uncle John and Aunt Elizabeth were never the same,”* she said. *“Donnie was the pride of their life.”*